Giovanni Giorgini | Elena Irrera [Eds.]

God, Religion and Society in Ancient Thought

From Early Greek Philosophy to Augustine

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edited by

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Foreword

The frequent employment of words like "god" (Greek *theos*; Latin *deus*), "the gods" (Greek *hoi theoi*; Latin *dei/dī*), and "the divine" (Greek *to theion*; Latin *divinum*) in several works of ancient Greek and Roman thought elicits a wide variety of philosophically problematic questions. In the first place, it is not entirely clear whether the theoretical accounts produced by poets and philosophers on the nature of the divine realm and its implications in the human world could be regarded as integral parts of a religious experience (either individual or collective). In the second place, it might be wondered whether it makes sense to speak of Greek and Roman religion as homogeneous and unitary phenomena and, if so, what their definitory traits would be. If we provisionally assume that religion involves a set of institutionalised practices, well-entrenched human attitudes, and recognition (intellectual, as well as attitudinal) of a non-human power, we might also ask how and to what extent these featuring elements could be either theoretically justified or, by contrast, critically challenged, by philosophical endeavours.

One last issue concerns the possibility for ancient works of natural theology and metaphysics to affect and shape – in virtue of the paradigms of divine perfection they offer – the underlying values of an ethically appropriate conduct in general, as well as those at the basis of wise legislative activity. In this regard, three main questions might be advanced: (1) how and on what grounds can gods and/or an abstract idea of the divine be viewed as paradigms of ethical (and not simply ontological) perfection? (2) How can a philosophical understanding of the divine be employed in the elaboration of specific institutional arrangements? (3) How can belief in the divine represent a guarantee of order and stability for the members of a political community?

The present collection of essays aims to investigate the interplay between philosophy, religion and society in the ancient world by examining how social structures and political institutions reacted to philosophical criticism. It spans from the 'rationalization' of the divine operated by early Greek philosophers to the notion of toleration one may find in in Augustine. It features such authors as Plato (who uses for the first time in history the words 'theology' and 'atheism'), and Aristotle, with his intellectualist view of god. The volume tries to show that, in Greek and Roman world, philosophical reflection in the domains of natural philosophy and

theology can offer a promising approach towards a critical understanding of concrete political phenomena, religious institutions, and conceptions on virtuous political activity. From a purely disciplinary point of view, it hopes to contribute to a problematization of aims and methods of political philosophy in ancient times.

The project of a co-edited volume on the philosophical relationships between the divine, religion, and society has developed within the framework of a series of activities pursued by the members of the *Collegium Politicum*, an international research network for ancient political theory. The annual meeting of the *Collegium* organized in Bologna in May 2018 has represented a fruitful opportunity for a joint reflection on the topic. However, only some of the essays included in this book have been presented and discussed at the meeting, and an invitation to contribute to a written volume has been extended also to non-members of the *Collegium Politicum* with recognised expertise in the field.

Note on Citations and Abbreviations

Quotation of Greek and Latin authors and titles follow the rules of abbreviation adopted in the Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (1940 edition, online version 2011).

A full list of the quoted ancient authors and works is supplied below.

Aeschines: Aeschin**.**
Against Timarchus

Andocides: And.
On the mysteries

Aristophanes: Aristoph**.**
Ecclesiazousae: *Eccl*.

Aristotle: Arist.
Analitica Priora: *Apr*
Athenaiōn Politeia: *AP*
De Anima: de An.
De Caelo: *Cael*.
de Divinatione per Somnia: *Div.Somn.*
De Partibus Animalium: *PA*
Eudemian Ethics: EE
Metaphysics: *Metaph*.
Nicomachean Ethics: *NE*
Physics: *Phys*.
Poetics: *Po*.
*De legibus: Leg**.***
De officiis: Off.

Critias: Critias (DK 88)

Dēmosthenes: D.
Against Meidias: *Ag. Meid.*
Against Aristogeiton

Dio Cassius: D.C.
Diogenes Laertius: D.L.
Diogenes Oenoandensis Epicureus: Diog. Oen.

Dionysius Halicarnassensis: D.H.
de Dēmosthene: *Dem*.

Euripides: E.
Sisyphus: *Sis*.

Eusebius: Eus.
Praeparatio evangelica: *P.E.*

Gorgias: Gorg.
Defense of Palamedes: *Pal*.
Helen: *Hel*.

Herodotus: Hdt.

Hermias Alexandrinus Philosophus: Herm.
Hermias Alexandrinus Philosophus, *in Platonis Phaedrum scholia*: [Herm.] in Phdr.

Hesiod: Hes.
Theogonia: *Th*.
Works and Days: *Op*.

Hippocrates: Hp.
De morbo sacro: Morb. Sacr.

Homer: Hom.
Iliad: *Il*.
Odyssey: *Od*.

Hippolytus
Refutationes

Isocrates: Isoc.
Busiris: *Bus*.

Evagoras: *Evag.*
Nicocles: *Nic*.
On the Peace
Panathenaicus: *Panat.*
Panegyricus: *Pan.*
Plataicus

Lactantius
Divinae Institutiones

Lucretius: Lucr.
De rerum natura

Lycurgus Orator: Lycurg.
Against Leocrates

Lysias: Lys.
Against Agoratus
Against Nicomachus
Against Andocides
In Eratosthenem: *Eratosth.*

Philodemus: Phld.
De Pietate: *Piet*.

Philolaus: Philol.

Philoponus: Phlp.
In Aristotelis De anima: *In de An.*

Plato: Pl.
Apology of Socrates: *Ap.*
Cratylus: *Crat.*
Crito: Cri.
Eutyphro: *Euthphr*.
Epinomis: Epin.
First Alcibiades: Alc.
Gorgias: Grg.
Ion

Leges: *Lg*.
Meno: *Men*.
Minos: *Min*.
Phaedo: Phd.
Philebus: *Phlb*.
Politicus: *Plt*.
Protagoras: *Prt*.
Republic: *Rep*.
Theaetetus: *Tht*.
Timaeus: *Ti*.
Philebus: *Phlb*.
Symposium: *Symp*.
Institutio Oratoria: *Inst*.

Sextus Empiricus: S.E.
Adversus mathematicos: *M*.
Pyrrhōneioi hypotypōseis: *Pyrrh. Hyp*.

Simplicius: Simp.
In Aristotelis de Caelo commentaria: [Simp.] *in Cael*.
In Aristotelis Physica commentaria: *in Ph*.

Stobaeus, Joannes [Stob.]
Florilegium

Themistius: Them.
Orationes, *Them. Or*.
Theognis: Thgn.

Thucydides: Th.

Theophrastus
Fragments: *Ph*. Op.

M. Terentius Varro
Antiquitates rerum divinarum

Xenophanes (DK 21)

Xenophon
Constitution of the Spartans (*Respublica Lacedaemoniorum*): *Lac.*
Cyropaedia: *Cyr.*
Hellenica (Historia Graeca): HG
Memorabilia: *Mem.*

Introduction

Giovanni Giorgini and Elena Irrera

The society in which ancient Greeks and Romans lived was a religious one. This idea is well captured by Jan Bremmer, who claims that

> [T]he ancient Greeks and Romans […] moved in a landscape where temples were everywhere, where gods adorned their coins, where the calendar went from religious festival to festival, and where religious rites accompanied all major transitions in life (Bremmer 2007: p. 11).

As a matter of fact, the relationship between religion and social structures has always played a fundamental role in human societies. Equally uncontested is the idea that the relationship at stake has always represented a major concern for political institutions and people in power – the latter being deeply aware of the potential of religion to shape habits of respect, obedience and discipline in the members of political communities. When we now speak of 'religion' we identify it mostly with its doctrinal content, which is to say, with its discourse about the nature of God, theodicy and the afterlife. What is less clear, though, is the specific meaning of the word "religion" in the ancient world. In fact, the difficulties experienced by modern and contemporary scholars in thematizing ancient Greco-Roman experiences in terms of "Greek religion" or "Roman religion" are due to the frequent use of the concept of "religion" as a set of fixed and codified norms and/or as a practice which refers to written texts of commonly accepted authority.

To reduce such difficulties, we might sketch out a provisional definition of 'ancient religion'. On the one hand, religion might be interpreted as 'practised religion', being regarded as different from philosophical theory on the gods and the divine. In this respect, religion would be qualified as a set of shared beliefs, cultic practices (such as sacrifice, prayer, divination) and reverential attitudes arising in both pre-political and political communities, being expressed by their members either in moral conduct towards their fellows or in formal worship of the gods. This meaning is successfully expressed by Jon D. Mikalson, who, by focusing on Greek religion, says:

[B]y 'practised' or 'popular' religion I mean the religious beliefs and practices of the vast majority of Greeks of the time, or, to paraphrase

Guthrie [Guthrie 1950: 258], the routine of religion which was accepted by most of the Greeks as a matter of course (Mikalson 2010: 1).

Jennifer Larson's definition of 'religion' in ancient Greece is equally accurate and effective:

[For our purposes] religion can be defined simply as the actions and beliefs pertaining to relations with supernatural agencies (gods, heroes, demons, etc.) that are characteristic of a culture (Larson 2013: 136).

This being the case, we may safely generalise that the Olympian religion was mostly a public and civic matter. Unsurprisingly, a different and more personal kind of religion started to be practiced since an early age, in the form of the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries, which promised, in Isocrates' words, "sweeter expectations regarding both the end of life and all eternity" to their adherents.[1]

Indeed, the Athenian calendar devoted around one hundred days to religious rituals and festivals. We must, however, recall a very important fact. It obviously makes sense to speak of ancient Greek 'religion' because the ancient Greeks knew all the elements that we commonly associate with 'religion', although they did not have a word for it.[2] The closest word, *eusebeia*, is defined by the priest Euthyphro in the homonymous Platonic dialogue as "the care (*therapeia*) that human beings have for the gods" (Pl., *Euthphr.* 12e). Thus religion, and especially civic religion and the Olympian gods, were mostly a matter of rite, of private and public ritual and cult rather than a theological issue: it entailed private worship, public festivals, processions, civic traditions, local rituals and communal sacrifices. The religious authority belonged to the citizen body as a whole—the *dēmos*—and it was exercised on its behalf by different officers. This latter element is very important, namely the official involvement of magistrates in the supervision and performance of sacrifices, which were assumed to connect human beings and gods: it neatly shows the official participation of civic institutions to religious practices.[3] It is also highly significative that

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1 Isocr., *Pan.* 28; cf. *On the peace* 34: "those who live a life of piety and justice pass their days in security for the present and have sweeter expectations for all eternity". On the mysteries see Bremmer 2014 and the many fine observations in Vegetti 1997. Vegetti persuasively argues that the Olympian religion and the mysteries complemented each other: the former was open to the citizen, the latter addressed the human being (in fact women participated in them also).

2 For an excellent introduction to ancient Greek religion see Bruit Zaidmann-Schmitt Pantel 1992.

3 Arist. *AP* LIV, 6-7 records the large number of magistrates elected by lot who perform religious duties: "The People also elect by lot the ten sacrificial officers, entitled Superintendents of Expiations, who offer the sacrifices prescribed by or-

many, including the Olympian gods, were associated with specific cities and had different names and cults in different places. Zeus, for instance, was associated with Olympia, while Apollo was associated with the two important temples of Delos and Delphi; Athena was the patron-goddess par excellence of Athens. Moreover, each *polis* had a different and distinctive pantheon of deities as well as specific, sometimes eponymous heroes and heroines, who were often conceived as the communal ancestors of the city[4]. When Plato, in the *Laws*, addresses the question of religious cult, he provides a very significative, traditional list of entities to be honoured: the Olympian gods, the gods of the city, the gods of the Netherworld, demons and local heroes.[5]

Thus, religion and politics, or rather civic policies, were closely connected to the point that we can safely say that the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and secular, was blurred if not altogether inexistent.[6] The Greeks experienced the presence of "the holy" in their everyday life: at home the hearth was devoted to Hestia, who protects the prosperity of the family.[7] Outside, there were shrines, images and statues of the gods, temples everywhere. The gods are not far, they have familiarity with men, as the anecdote about Heraclitus reported by Aristotle shows: some visitors who wanted to see him found him at home warming himself at the stove and hesitated to enter; but Heraclitus said: "Come in, don't be afraid; there are gods even here" (*PA* I, 5.645a 19-23).

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acle, and for business requiring omens to be taken watch for good omens in cooperation with the soothsayers. It also elects by lot ten others called the Yearly Sacrificial Officers, who perform certain sacrifices and administer all the four-yearly festivals except the Panathenaic Festival" (transl. H. Rackham 1952). One of the top officers, the archon *basileus*, was in charge of overseeing religious matters, notably the sacrifices involved in the "ancestral cults"; however, the other two archons -the Eponymous and the Polemarch- had religious duties too. See Bruit Zaidmann- Schmitt Pantel 1992: 47-48.

4 Larson 2013: 139. Eponymous heroes and heroines are also linked with specific territories and groups or families within a city: this is the case of Lakedaimon, for instance, who gave the name to the area around Sparta. On eponymous heroes, and especially heroines, see Kearns 1998.

5 Plato, *Lg.* IV, 717a-b; cf. 738d.

6 This is shown by the great number of extant inscriptions related to religious practices: they record the financial accounts of sanctuaries, specify correct ritual procedures, describe dedications to gods and goddesses as well as oracular pronouncements, record religious calendars.

7 Interestingly, Hestia is also the goddess who presides over the common hearth of the polis and can be identified with the lawfulness of the city: see Xen., *Hell*. II, 3.52.

Another interesting example of the interconnection between religion and politics is provided by the development of shared rituals around common sanctuaries, which contributed significantly to the construction of regional communities. Such rituals offered a precious opportunity for the creation of networks of people coming from different cities, who met and interacted at the so called "Panhellenic sanctuaries". The articulations of ethnic myths associated with those shared rituals shaped a sense of a larger community, strengthened by ideas of consanguinity and a common history of migration. It is in this respect that ritual action became vital to the process of politicization of the newly moulded regional communities. The oracles who enjoyed Panhellenic prestige – such as the Pythia, Apollo's priestess at the sanctuary of Delphi – did not only provide indications on the most appropriate rituals of purification, but also gave advice about such political matters as sending out settlers to establish a colony, waging a war or declaring a truce. Priests and soothsayers had a fundamental religious and political role in performing rituals of purification (*katharsis*): when human beings trespass against the gods, for instance by shedding human blood as in the cases of Oedipus and Orestes, the entire community is contaminated (*miasma*).

What is more, the religious authority of the priestess could be bought off for political purposes, just like the gods themselves could be appeased by prayers and lavish sacrifices – according to Plato's harsh criticism of the traditional image presented by the poets.[8] In this regard, Herodotus reports a very significative fact: at the end of the 6th century BCE, when the Alcmeonids wanted the Spartans to help them chase off the tyrants from their city, they built the beautiful temple at Delphi and bribed the Pythia with gifts "to advise any Spartiates who came, whether they were there on personal or public business, to liberate Athens"[9].

Another important fact to recall is that the primary source of religious authority was the city government, "which undertook the sponsorship of cults within its territorial boundaries" (Larson 2013: 144). For instance,

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8 See Pl., *Rep.* II, 377c-383c; cf. Hom., *Il.* IX.497-501: the gods can be bribed.
9 Herodotus 5.63. He adds that the Spartans sent a distinguished citizen, Anchimolius, with a task force to expel the Pisistratids. Herodotus takes this opportunity to commend Spartan piety and religiosity: he states that the Spartans did this "despite the fact that they and the Pisistratids were close guest-friends and allies (*xeinious*), because for them divine matters took precedence over human ones". The Alcmeonids, on the other hand, were notoriously accursed for the sacrilegious murder of Cylon and his acolytes, who had sheltered as suppliants in a temple but were nonetheless summarily executed: Thucydides 1.126.

the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus exploited religion in a twofold way. He first played on religious awe to hire a very tall and good-looking woman to pretend to be the goddess Athena who escorted him back into town after he had been expelled (Hdt. I, 60; *AP* 14). Once in power again, he took good care of religious matters: for instance, he heeded the advice of oracles and purified the island of Delos. This deed must have struck the Athenians because Herodotus, after almost one century, was able to describe the purification procedure Pisistratus had adopted (Hdt. V, 64).

Concern for religion as a matter deeply intertwined with civic and political dynamics, as well as an interest for theological issues, also apply to ancient Roman Paganism. Across the centuries, in the Regal Period, as well as in Early and Late Republic up to Principate, both the stability and the evolution of Rome's institutions are deeply indebted to participation of citizens and non-citizens in religious cults and traditions. In the transition from the Regal to the Republican period, Rome expanded its hegemonic power by accepting and integrating the cults and the deities of Latin, Etruscan and other Italian allies. In the Imperial Era, it adopted a politics of inclusion of different people, cultures, deities and religious traditions, while new foundations by the Romans were generally likely to adhere to Roman religious models. Especially in the Republican Period, Roman religious cults and reverential attitudes played a vital role in strengthening civic ties among citizens and peaceful attitudes towards non-citizens. In this way, they contributed to shaping and preserving the *mos maiorum*, which represented the primary core of morality, and the sense of justice and loyalty to the *civitas*. Just as in ancient Greek civilization, even in Roman antiquity moral values are not experienced uncritically, nor do they commit the community members to a passive obedience to the laws. In a similar vein, the impulse to religiously interpret existence is not a passive adaptation to transcendent and inscrutable divine will, nor does it hinge on systematic revelations enclosed in sacred texts.

The idea of a human critical approach towards their relationships to the gods emerges in Cicero (106-43 BCE), who suggests that the word *religio* would stem from the verb *relegere*, meaning "read again" or "re-consider" (*ND* II, 28). The iterative prefix "re-" would convey and strengthen the sense of a meticulous care and intellectual understanding of the things related to the cult of the gods. An alternative interpretation of the word is instead offered by the Christian rhetorician and apologist Lactantius (240-320 CE), who maintains that the word *religio* would refer to the verb *religare*, meaning "to bind". In that case, the word at stake would indicate the intimate relationship that every believer develops towards God through a "bond of piety" (*Divinae Institutiones* IV, 28).

An operative definition of "religion" can plausibly incorporate both the idea of a bond of piety of human beings towards the realm of the divine and the sense of an intellectual search for truth and authentic goodness. This is for instance the view of religion endorsed by the Christian philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), who in his *City of God* (*De civitate Dei* X, 1) claims that the word itself refers exclusively to the service and submission of human beings toward God (similarly to the Greek word *latreia*). In his view, true worship involves not simply showing reverence through cults and sacrifices, but also *re-choosing* Him, (X, 3), which involves learning how to understand and love Him and His nature. In this way religion can be conceived as a *modus vivendi*, i.e. a mode of conduct within which human beings are allowed to undertake paths of research and attribution of meaning to their individual and group life, as well as to activate cognitive, motivational, affective and relational skills.

Unlike the pagan religion, Christianity is based on a monotheistic cult and is supported by the holy scriptures (Old and New testament), as well as by interpretations of the scriptures themselves provided by missionaries, apologists and the Church Fathers. Having been spread across the Roman Empire by protagonists such as the evangelist Mark, Paul of Tarsus and Ignatius of Antioch, Christian religion was often the ground of persecutions by several Roman emperors (such as Nero, Domitianus, Traianus, Decius and Valerianus). Its legitimacy among other religions was first proclaimed by the emperor Constantine in 313 CE (edict of Milan), and it became the only and mandatory religion of the Empire only in 380 CE thanks to Emperor Theodosius I (edict of Thessalonica). Like pagan religion, Christianity can be expressed in the form of an asymmetric reverential respect towards divinity. In this light, God becomes not only a paradigm of ethical perfection, but also a source of precise obligations for human beings (towards both divinity and other human beings).

Both in Greek and Roman religion (pagan and Christian), the search for an understanding of the nature of the divine prompts theoretical speculations that take the shape of real "theologies". In the Greek world, the first occurrence of the word *theologia* occurs in Plato, namely in an author who, without openly questioning the contemporary Olympian religion, clearly advocated a monotheistic, intellectual vision of God as the reason behind history.[10] Another notable view of *theologia* is the one endorsed by

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10 Plato, *Rep.* II, 379a4. On the disputed meaning of the word *theologia* see Naddaf 1996. In *Timaeus* 28c we read: "Now, to discover the maker and father of this universe is a task indeed; and having discovered him, to reveal him to all people

Aristotle, who takes it not only a branch of the theoretical science called 'first philosophy' or 'science of first principles', but also "the ultimate and highest goal of all philosophical study of Being".[11]

As for theology in ancient Roman world, in the second part of his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, the Roman writer and erudite M. Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE), outlines a systematic theory of the Roman gods and religious traditions by distinguishing theology into three different kinds. As S. Augustine explains (*De civitate Dei*, Book VI, 2-6), Varro introduced a mythical, a political and a natural theology. While mythical theology explores the gods as described by the poets, political theology concerns the official State religion, its institutions and cults. Notably, Varro lived at a time in which State religion was experiencing a state of crisis, and he believed that religion itself derived its validity from the authority of the State, not the opposite. The third form of theology identified by Varro, the natural one, is for Augustine "religion" in the true sense, given that it explores the nature of the divine as a principle revealed in reality.

What has been said so far reinforces the conviction that ancient religion cannot be reduced to religious practices. Rather, it can be complemented and even buttressed by theoretical endeavours aiming at exploring the nature of the divine and the relation between god and/or the gods to several aspects of human reality, including the social and the political. In other words, religion somehow expresses itself through the channels of philosophy. It is for this reason that the present collection of essays aims to explore possible ways in which philosophical conceptualizations of god, the gods, and the divine in the ancient world interact with traditional religious practices and institutions, as well as with non-philosophical images of the divine.

Greek religion is in the first place a "social" experience, which shapes the cultural and political identity of Greek cities by way of cults and references to the gods of mythology. In "The *Polis* as the Measure of All Things: The Relation of Greek Mythology to *Polis* Religion", Nurdane Şimşek outlines the idea of a "Greek *polis* religion", which she understands as a tradition open to change. Indeed, myth itself can be regarded as a malleable resource, depending on the contingent and changing socio-political needs of each city. The author contends that religion itself is shaped

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is impossible". Plato, famously, bans the poets from his perfect city because they give a false image of the gods by attributing human defects to them: they provide a wrong education to the youth (*Republic* III and X).

11 Cf. Jaeger 1936, pp. 2-3.

by the polis and *for the polis*, and she suggests that the separation between the idea of the divine and the city occurs only with Plato's philosophy. Moving from the perspective of practical religion to a more theoretical outlook, it is worth stressing that, in classical scholarship, the gradual elaboration of more critical and less anthropomorphic views on god and the divine is often framed in terms of a shift from *mythos* to *logos* (an image famously proposed by Wilhelm Nestle in *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, 1940). Indeed, such a shift is notoriously considered as one of the key moments in the genesis and evolution of Greek philosophical thought in matters of nature and divinity. Although a deep-rooted academic tradition has outlined an antagonism between a supposed "religious" vision of the world (i.e. one expressed by the myth), and a properly scientific one, the idea of a rigid dichotomy between religion and philosophy risks compromising an adequate understanding of the role that the idea of the divine plays in philosophical inquiry. In the essay "On the Rationalization of Ancient Greek Theology: The Purge of Anthropomorphism from Hesiod to Plato and Aristotle", Manuel Knoll suggests that the process of "rationalization" of ancient Greek theology does not develop in a linear fashion. The author identifies two intersecting approaches on god and the gods: one focusing on the elimination of mythological elements (one whose main representatives are Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras and Aristotle); the other integrating mythological elements (and exemplified by Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles and Plato). The idea of theology as a subject in its own right, one distinct from the study of nature, is notably found in the work of Xenophanes. In the paper "The 'theology' of the first philosopher-poets: the case of Xenophanes", Sylvana Chrysakopoulou presents Platonic and Aristotelian evidence to qualify Xenophanes not only as a serious philosopher, but also as one who affects the Eleatic tradition by marking a fundamental break from the philosophy of nature of the Milesians. Chrysakopoulou stresses the existence of an epistemological dualism between knowledge and opinion in Xenophanes, despite his being (unlike Parmenides) an optimist about the possibilities for intellectual progress within the sphere of *doxa*. Also, Xenophanes would set the basis for a relation of *nous* to the world that anticipates Aristotle's account of the effect of the unmoved mover on the *kosmos*.

Philosophical reflection on the divine and on religion knows a decisive turning point with the development of the Sophistic movement in the fifth century BCE. The Sophists offer a variegated series of solutions to the problem of the relationship between man and good that highlights the centrality of human rationality in knowledge and action. More to the

point, human reason and sense-experience open (and, from other points of view, delimit) the possibility of knowing the gods. In the essay "Gods and Religion in the Sophistic Context: between Agnosticism and Utilitarian Rationalism", Francesca Eustacchi proposes a conceptualization of the divine showing how the Sophists take a critical approach towards popular religious beliefs and traditions. More specifically, Eustacchi underlines how the divine can represent an artificial construction with a predominantly social function, the gods being the motivational horizon for virtuous action.

The idea of God as a man-made invention, used to enforce laws and promote virtuous behaviour among citizens, is notably attributed to the sophist and politician Critias. In "The Man who Invented God: Atheism in the Sisyphus Fragment" Giovanni Giorgini addresses the topic by focusing on the Sisyphus fragment, in which the protagonist establishes a link between the origins of mankind, the emergence of laws and the role of gods. By analysing the fragment in relation to the cultural context of the 5th century BCE, the author argues that Critias' supposed 'atheism', rather than being rooted in metaphysical reasons, was part of an innovative educational project to be employed for political purposes.

One of the most distinctive features of Ancient Greek views of religion is a coexistence between polytheistic religious cults and popular imagery with philosophical reflections inclined towards metaphysical monism and some forms of monotheism. In his essay "Greek Polytheist Cults and Monotheist Thinking in Tension (and its Political Reverberations)" Josef Moural stresses the problematic tension between cultural polytheism and philosophical monotheism in the Presocratics and in Plato, with a special focus on the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology of Socrates*. In those dialogues, reference to the gods does not prevent the reader from sketching out some form of monotheism. Nevertheless, the employment of the gods in educational and political projects remains unquestioned in virtue of its power to secure a harmonious and successful functioning of political institutions.

Besides institutionally shaped attitudes of reverence towards the gods, examples of more critical forms of respect for the divine can be identified in ancient Greek writings. In her essay "*Eusebeia* for the Gods as a Matter of Justice. Greek Popular Religion and Plato's *Eutyphro*", Elena Irrera attempts to analyse some uses of the word "*eusebeia*" in Greek classical antiquity, laying stress on possible ways in which the notion at stake (which we might consider as a form of "religious piety") helps to shape the goals and argumentative strategies of Plato in his *Euthyphro*. Irrera contends that Socratic piety, rather than indicating sheer formal correctness in matters of religious cult, represents an invitation to adopt a critical attitude in

ethically religious controversies, and it can also be qualified as a source of acts of justice and civic respect in the domain of human relationships.

The concept of "God" has metaphysical, epistemological and ethical implications which Plato tries to address in many of his dialogues. In "Demiurge, Good, Forms. Some reflections on a crucial problem of Plato's Metaphysics", Francisco Lisi takes issue with some ontological and epistemological aspects related to the theoretical image of the Platonic demiurge – a figure which, despite essential in the theological discourse of Ancient Greek and Roman polytheist currents, can be properly identified as "God". By analysis of some passages of Plato's *Timaeus*, Lisi presents the Platonic Demiurge both as a personal god, superior to the traditional ones, and as a "mind" (*nous*) responsible for the shaping of the order and inner rationality of the sensible world. Although being conceptually distinct from the Platonic form of the Good, the Demiurge is affected by that form. This is not to say, however, that the figure at stake presupposes a contemplation of the other forms. As Lisi suggests, the idea that such forms are objects existing independently of the Demiurge is a matter of pure speculation.

Plato is aware of the importance of religion in ensuring the cohesion of the *polis*. Such an interest emerges prominently in his *Laws*, where religion is treated not only as a set of practices that permeates the education and the morality of all citizens, but also as knowledge of philosophical principles possessed by wise men in power. In the essay "Religion in Plato's *Laws*: Traditional Cults and Astral Theology, Silvia Gastaldi suggests that Plato's *Laws* enable readers to identify two different patterns of religion: on the one hand, the traditional, civic Olympian religion; on the other, a philosophical one, based on astral theology. Gastaldi traces a continuity between the theological theory already illustrated by Plato in the *Timaeus* and the philosophical-theological interests of the members of the Nocturnal Council, which is the most important political organ in the best city illustrated in the *Laws*. The main contention of Gastaldi's paper is that the two patterns of religion find a point of connection in the philosophical notion of order (*kosmos*). Indeed, the harmony of the songs and movements in the dance performed in religious celebrations reflects the harmony of the cosmos. This is the way in which all citizens have the possibility to participate in the order guaranteed by the cosmic Intelligence.

In the *Laws*, Plato examines a variety of forms of impiety towards the gods, among which the belief that the gods can be bribed. In "*Plato, Lg. 910:* What impiety?" Alberto Maffi offers a translation and commentary of the relevant passage by emphasizing the difference between bribers worthy of compassion, as long as they perform their rituals in public shrines, and people who, due to their extreme impiety, deserve the death penalty. Maffi

focuses in particular on this second category of offenders and argues that the central point of the context in which the passage is situated is that pious and decent citizens achieve the protection of the gods.

The polyvocal use of the notions of "god", "the gods" and "divinity" in Plato elicits important methodological issues related to Plato's art of writing. In "Plato: The Pervasive Nature of the Divinity and the Importance of Religion in the *polis*", Maurizio Migliori offers an interpretation of the multiplicity of perspectives adopted by Plato in his dialogues by resort to two distinct, although related approaches of investigation: on the one hand, one premised on the idea that Plato's dialogues are written games, open to allusions and insights on given topics which the reader has the chance to grasp; on the other hand, an approach which he defines as "multi-focal". On this second approach, reality can be explored from either a human or a divine perspective, with respectively different outcomes. Migliori argues that the two perspectives can better emerge in the nature of the human laws and in the coexistence between their imperfection and their divine inspiration.

In the *Cratylus*, Plato attempts to turn the traditional discourse of the names of the gods into an opportunity for a rational enquiry on different levels of reality. In "Naming God as "King" and the Figure of the Legislator in Plato's *Cratylus*", Jakub Jinek examines *Crat.* 391–411 and argues that an investigation of the metaphysics of principles underlying the names of the highest divine triad Zeus–Cronus–Ouranus in Plato's *Cratylus* is functional to an understanding of the main political issue of the dialogue, which the author identifies as the proper use of the title "king". Plato's appeal to metaphysics would shed light on the ethical and political inappropriateness of hereditary kingship, as well as on the legitimacy of philosopher-kings endowed with legislative capacity.

The links between metaphysics and the discourse on divinity are also a prominent concern of Aristotle. In Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle postulates the idea of God as a metaphysical principle able to regulate the physical necessity active in the universe. However, rather unexplored is the issue of the practical consequences that the principle at stake can have in the human life. In "Aristotle's Departure from the Commonsense Concept of God: His Doctrine of the Prime Mover and its Relation to the Ideal Human Life", Maria Liatsi addresses the issue of the relationships between God and human beings in Aristotle by treating *Metaphysics* XII in the light of *Nicomachean Ethics* X. In her essay, she shows special concern for the idea of God as a paradigmatic example of the best and most pleasant and happy human activity: intellectual contemplation.

The relationship between God, human beings and the most appropriate condition for their political association emerges also in ancient Roman theorizations. Denis Walter's essay "Variants of Cosmopolitanism and Individual States in Cicero's Works" centers on the issue of cosmopolitanism in the late Roman Republic by analyzing some possible uses of cosmopolitan ideas and approaches in Cicero's works. In the first place, the author identifies an ethical cosmopolitanism, which he distinguishes from a political one. While ethical cosmopolitanism is rooted on a minimum level of virtuous moral agency and presupposes horizontal relationships between individuals, political cosmopolitanism has a vertical structure, and relationships between the rulers and the ruled are rooted either in the idea of God or in a natural law. These two sources, by drawing on the idea of a universal reason, qualify a cosmopolitanism that can act only as a regulative ideal. Being unable to find institutional channels for expression, the only political model approaching the one rooted in God and/or natural law is the one having individual states in a respectful and peaceful interaction as main protagonists.

Among various human attitudes related to religious experience, toleration of other people's creeds or lack of creed is one that has significant political implications. In "Religious Toleration in Augustine?" Christoph Horn explores the issue with reference to the thought of Augustine. On the one hand, he seems to gradually leave behind his former tolerant attitude towards heretics and non-believers and defend political coercion. On the other, he seems to implicitly theorize some of the values that might be ascribed to contemporary political liberalism. With reference to the latter aspect, Horn identifies a subtle interplay of conceptually different forms of toleration, among which one based on love and humanism; one pursued with the intention to preserve unity, and one based on the idea of a free conscience.

The last essay of the collection addresses the issue of the reception of the images of god and the divine illustrated in Plato's *Laws* by two contemporary political philosophers, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. In "Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin on God and the Divine in Plato's *Laws*", Bernat Torres takes issue with the interpretations of relevant passages of the dialogue provided by each of the two philosophers. While Strauss sees in the *Laws* the conceptual underpinnings of piety – and a consequent virtual defense of Socrates – Voegelin takes the *Laws* as a work ultimately designed to shed insight into Plato's thought about god and the destiny of man.

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The *Polis* as the Measure of All Things: The Relation of Greek Mythology to *Polis* Religion

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Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between Greek mythology and Greek religion by focusing on the characteristics of *polis* religion. Although the system of the gods offered by Hesiod and Homer was accepted by all Greeks, the religion of each *polis* was based on a specific god and particular rituals and practices. The paper discusses the changing and adapting features of Greek myths and rituals and argues that *polis* religion should be interpreted as a structure shaped by the *polis* for the *polis*. It contends that *polis* religion represents an immanent political-religious structure. The separation between the city and a transcendent divinity, as well as the one between politics and theology, only started at a later time with Plato's philosophy.

I. The dynamic structure of Greek mythology

Ancient Greek civilization has hosted various mystery religions such as Orphism and philosophical religions such as Pythagoreanism. But when it comes to Ancient Greek religion, the first thing that comes to mind is *polis* religion, in which the Olympian gods played the leading role. There is no doubt that Greek myths and religions are strongly related. However, since they are not referring to the same phenomenon, the attempt to understand or explain Greek religion solely through Greek mythology would be incomplete, and it would therefore support an inappropriate approach. For this reason, in order to adequately understand the Greek conception of religion, this study addresses as a first step the much-discussed question of what mythology is. Based on the answer to this question, the article examines in a second step the relationship between Greek mythology and Greek religion focusing on *polis* religion.

Explanations of myths, which constitute the subject of mythology, have begun to take their place in the literature starting from the 5th century BC, when myths had still power on people's life. Undoubtedly, the most

common of these explanations was the allegorical approach, which was effective throughout ancient history and the Middle Ages and has continued its influence until today. This approach claimed that myths were a kind of philosophy, science, or theology that "concealed" the truths about nature or morality through allegories (see Graf 1996, pp. 176-198). Interpretations of Greek myths and their role in Greek civilization are, of course, not limited to this explanation. Scholars from different fields such as philosophy, anthropology, philosophy of religion, and philology were all interested in myths, which led to many new studies. These works, which started in the 18th century and increased especially in the 19th and 20th century, have tried to explain the myths with different approaches such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, historical and cultural studies (Dowden 1992, pp. 22-38; Bremmer 1987a, pp. 278-283).

Although there is no agreement on the definition of myth within all these studies, there have been some prominent approaches. According to Walter Burkert, "myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance" (1982, p. 23). In line with this, Geoffrey S. Kirk stated that myths belong to a wider class of traditional stories (1974, pp. 13, 25). As a matter of fact, the word "mythos" in Greek means "story" and "tale" as well as "word" and "speech" (Liddell & Scott 1974, p. 454). Although these explanations of myths are not sufficient and final, they provide some important clues about their characteristic features.

First, it should be stated that the meaning of the term 'myth' (*mythos*) in ancient Greece and its usage today in daily, even academic, language is quite different. Today, the concept of 'myth' has generally a negative connotation and is used to refer to an unreal situation, in the sense of a 'tale' or 'story'. At best, it points to the legend of an event, phenomenon, or person, which again is connected with the idea of moving away from reality. In contrast, the majority of the ancient Greeks did not question the historical truth of the myths. They took the myths for granted and perceived the world through their perspective. Ordinary Greek people also did not question the impact of the myths on the functioning of their city states. While the poets and philosophers started questioning this prevailing view in the 5th century, ordinary Greeks adhered to it for a much longer period of time.

It is striking that in their above-mentioned definitions Burkert and Kirk emphasize the traditionalism of myths. But what is meant by the 'tradition' of myths? Myths originate as anonymous stories that are passed down from generation to generation in an oral way by rhapsodes. Although these stories are generally expressed in the form of poetry, a lyrical form was not mandatory. Likewise, there was not a singular type of poetry in